



News Release

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West Nile virus: reducing habitat will help you avoid mosquito bites

Another season of monitoring dead birds begins across the state

OLYMPIA – Sunny days and warmer temperatures make way for lots of outdoor activities. It's also mosquito season, which increases the risk for West Nile virus and the need to avoid mosquito bites. The state Department of Health has resumed tracking the virus in our state with the online [dead bird reporting system](#).

"It's important to track [West Nile virus](#) so people have the information they need to avoid getting sick," said Maryanne Guichard, assistant secretary for the state Department of Health's environmental public health division. "This system helps show where West Nile virus activity is in our state. It also lends a hand to counties where resources are limited."

Locating and testing dead birds is one way to track West Nile virus since it's primarily a disease of birds — especially crows, ravens, jays, magpies, and hawks. These birds often die when infected with West Nile virus. The Department of Health asks people to watch for dead birds and report them online or contact their [local health agency](#). Dead bird monitoring is encouraged from May through November.

State and local health agencies will use this information to track unusual increases or clusters of bird deaths. Knowing where this happens helps with prevention and control strategies — it shows where people might be at higher risk of West Nile virus infection.

In 2011, no human, bird, or horse cases of West Nile virus were detected. Five mosquito samples in Franklin, Grant, and Yakima counties tested positive for the virus. The highest level of West Nile virus in Washington so far was 2009 when 38 human cases were confirmed, and one died.

West Nile virus is unpredictable, and there's no way to know for sure how much activity will be seen in our state this season. The wet spring created perfect conditions for breeding mosquitoes. Even small amounts of stagnant water collected in buckets, old tires, cans, or flower pots become habitat for mosquito larvae. Water in birdbaths, animal troughs, and wading pools should be changed twice a week.

Your best defense against West Nile virus is to take steps now to reduce habitat around your home and protect yourself from mosquito bites.

- Limit outdoor activities between dusk and dawn, when mosquitoes are the most active.
- Wear long-sleeve shirts, long pants, and hats when going into wetlands or woods.
- Use an effective repellent on exposed skin; follow directions on the product label.
- Make sure window and door screens fit tight; repair or replace broken screens.
- Also, fix leaky outdoor faucets and sprinklers.

Most people bitten by an infected mosquito carrying West Nile virus won't get sick; of those who do, most will develop mild illness with fever and headache. Yet West Nile virus can cause severe disease, including meningitis or encephalitis. People over 50 years old and those with weak immune systems are at higher risk for serious illness.

Check out our [West Nile virus prevention videos](#) and get more information on our [West Nile virus prevention website](#). Regular updates are available by calling the toll-free West Nile virus information line, 1-866-78-VIRUS.

The [Department of Health website](#) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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